

# Oke Rail link – ACTION NEEDED NOW to protect tourism



**Just as *The Moorlander* ‘went to press’, Devon’s rail ambitions were due to be discussed at an online sustainable growth event with plans for new stations in Tavistock and Okehampton expected to form part of the Devon Metro strategy.**

ConnectedCities, a non-political initiative which proposes a global sustainable development strategy invited Councillor Andrea Davis, Devon County Council (DCC) Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Development, and Chair of the Peninsula Rail Task Force to talk about the Devon Metro at its online seminar on Wednesday, May 20th.

Councillor Davis said: “We’re honoured to have been invited to take part in this online seminar by ConnectedCities. Devon is unique across the country with a metro ambition which is semi-rural rather than being purely city-based. The Devon Metro strategy was developed after seeing consistent year on year growth in rail passenger numbers which were increasing the pressure on peak rail services.

“We’re keen to attract new passengers to rail services and the Devon Metro strategy aims to improve access to existing stations, deliver new stations, increase capacity and improve the quality of services.”

As recently reported in *The Moorlander*, DCC has submitted a bid through the Government’s Beeching Reversal Fund initiative to accelerate plans to reinstate around five miles of track between Tavistock and Bere Alston thus easing pressure on the A386, the main commuter route from Tavistock to Plymouth. That is indeed welcome news for the area but little has been mentioned of late by DCC regarding the reintroduction of the Okehampton to Exeter rail link which has been discussed regularly in *The Moorlander* for many months.

On the original Metro plan, Okehampton was designated as a ‘Metro station’ but would now appear to be taking a back seat to the Bere Alston to Tavistock proposal instead.

It is widely acknowledge that while DCC have supported Okehampton over recent years with the summer Sunday service to and from Exeter, they also state that they are keen to see the line

brought back into regular weekday service: “The authority has received encouraging support from the Department for Transport (DfT) and GWR is investigating options.”

Not only is this comment outdated, as this newspaper reported exclusively some weeks ago that GWR was not just ‘investigating options’ it had in fact submitted a feasibility report to the Department of Transport (DfT) last July! There has been no public announcement since, and as we have said before, the silence is deafening!

The lack of progress (and communication) with regards to the reinstatement of rail services between Okehampton and Exeter has become a constant source of irritation to those many interested parties who have spent several years campaigning for this vital link to be restored.

However as reported exclusively in *The Moorlander* this April, Rail UK forum member Tony Hill took part in a three day Network Rail (NR) exploratory walkout from Coleford Junction at the beginning of March with an as yet unconfirmed view to the line being transferred to NR ownership.

Accepting that elements of the rail industry disappeared into virtual lockdown shortly afterwards, findings from this exercise have obviously yet to be made public while we are still waiting for official confirmation that the exercise occurred at all by the agencies concerned.

Despite direct approaches to local County Councillors, local MPs, the various serving Secretaries of State and senior management of the respective agencies involved, requests for transparency have been met with a conveyor belt of meaningless rhetoric, lip service and prevarication as the whole debate is shrouded behind the cloak of ‘commercial sensitivity’.

Former Chairman of OkeRail, Mike Davies and Okehampton Town Councillor, Paul Vachon started the ball rolling over 12 years ago with an initial marketing report and it was only when the recession hit the town that the local authorities and government started to listen.

Their aim then shifted to supporting those affected by the recession and developed a strategy to promote the town. At the top of the list was increasing footfall by encouraging tourism and reopening the Okehampton to Exeter rail link. The collapse of the Dawlish line gave even more incentive for the government to look at rail communications in the South West, and the opportunity to promote the Okehampton line.

The strategy required a sound marketing plan and while there has been a plethora of well-meaning experts in their field who have freely offered salient and workable propositions, their efforts have been relentlessly stonewalled. The time has now come for those of influence and authority to flex some muscle and bellow from the rooftops that Okehampton and the surrounding area IS a tourist destination of some note and importance and that the Okehampton

to Exeter rail link is an essential artery in the area’s quest for survival even more so now as we approach a post COVID-19 landscape than it ever was before. When life returns to the new normal it is plainly obvious that being just five miles from the edge of Dartmoor, the reopening of a rail service with its local hub sited at Okehampton Station would bring many tourists, walkers, bikers, YHA overnightriders etc. The potential boost to the local economy is obvious.

Since the launch of *The Moorlander* almost four years ago we have been campaigning incessantly for the reinstatement of the Okehampton to Exeter line. Irrespective of their individual agendas we have supported every single one of the various action groups fighting for a common cause.

We have interviewed the major players, and when other media were sniffing around the periphery of the facts, as already mentioned, *The Moorlander* was the only newspaper to exclusively reveal that GWR had actually submitted a feasibility report to the Department for Transport (DfT) last July.

The obvious consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent fall-out is inevitable, but while every business worth its salt is now planning its own individual exit route then every public authority from parish councils to county councils should be planning positive measures to reengage with visitors and boost the potential tourism economy when lockdown restrictions are finally lifted.

Of course the signs are already there but it appears largely short-termism, while the region overall, particularly Okehampton, needs an all-embracing long-term tourism strategy. This has been mooted for many years. Personal agendas and egos need to be put to one side while we all work towards the one common goal which is to get this region back on its feet after this crippling pandemic.

It’s been two years, four months and counting, since the then Secretary of State, Chris Grayling’s letter promised so much and to date has delivered so little!

Coronavirus disease pandemic or not, we NEED to see SOME ACTION NOW before the tumbleweed takes root!

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